

THE CHUEGH AND THE TOWNS

163

market-town to become a city. But there were other contests going on at the same time, between similar ecclesiastical bodies and other cities in a higher state of development. The great town of Exeter had already begun its dispute with the Cathedral, which developed sixty years later into one of the most famous law-suits of a litigious generation. The quarrel seems to have arisen from the dislike felt by the municipal magistrates of a rival jurisdiction within their walls, and the resulting inconveniences, rather than from any grave oppression of the citizens by the Cathedral. Elsewhere, as for instance at Eading, the cause of strife was the claim of the churchmen to appoint the municipal officers. Such a claim was a definite attempt to keep back the independent growth of these cities and to subject the mercantile class to the feudal rule of Abbots and Bishops.¹ It was a fortunate circumstance that most towns in England belonged to the Crown. The Norman Kings had not been long in discovering that it was their interest to foster the growth of wealthy communities, and gain the sympathy of their rulers. They had handed on to the Plantagenets the tradition that when a town on royal domain asked for a charter of new privileges, the gift should be granted or sold. The quiet growth of the English boroughs, independent in local affairs, but loyal to the Crown and the central government, had been the result of this wise policy. There were no 'free cities' like those which defied the German Emperor, no armed communes like those which Philip van Artevelde was then leading in rebellion against the Count of Flanders. Yet the prosperity and independence of English town-life was rapidly and freely maturing. On the other hand, those centres of commerce and industry, which had grown up round the walls of great abbeys and cathedrals, found that, though the Church was ready to nurse the child, she was not prepared to allow freedom to the man. It was not to the interest of the Abbot, as it had been to the interest of the King, to grant charters to towns that belonged to him. If the King granted the right of electing a mayor, he

¹ Mrs. Green's *Town Life in Fifteenth Cent.*, i. 801, 351-63, 368-81.; Kitchin's *Winchester* (Historic Towns series); for Canterbury see *Rot. Parl.* in. 53, pet. 11, and *Cont. Eulog.*, 342.